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Medical Corps, U. S. Army

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The Society of the Cincinnati
In the Birth of
The Constitution of the United States

By

LIEUTENANT-COLONEL EDGAR ERSKINE HUME
Medical Corps, United States Army

President of the Society of the Cincinnati in the State of Virginia and Assistant Secretary General

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.231 Hume, Edgar Erskine, 1889–

The roll of the Society of the Cincinnati in the birth of the Constitution of the United States, by Lieutenant-Colonel Edgar Erskine Hume ... [Philadelphia, 1938]

cover-title, 7 p. 23cm.

"Reprinted from Pennsylvania history, official organ of the Pennsylvania historical association, volume v, number 2, April, 1938, pages 101–107."

"Address delivered at the Constitution day celebration at Reading, Pennsylvania, under the auspices of the Joseph Hiester chapter, Sons of the American revolution, and the Berks county chapter, Daughters of the American revolution, September 17th, 1937."

1. Society of the Cincinnati. 2. U. S. Constitution. I. Title.

39–4230

Library of Congress E202.1.A7H873

Gift '38 [2] 369.131

THE ROLE OF THE SOCIETY OF THE CINCINNATI IN THE BIRTH OF THE CONSTITUTION OF THE UNITED STATES[1]

By Lieutenant-Colonel EDGAR ERSKINE HUME
Medical Corps, United States Army

President of the Society of the Cincinnati in the State of Virginia
and
Assistant Secretary General

THE Society of the Cincinnati played a more important rôle in the creation of the Constitution of the United States than is generally realized. Not only were nearly half of the framers of that mighty document members of the Society of the Cincinnati, but the fact that General Washington was president general of the society had not a little to do with his consenting to reënter public life and become a delegate to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. To understand all this it is necessary briefly to review the early history of the Cincinnati and Washington's connection with it.

The Society of the Cincinnati was instituted at the cantonments of the American Army on the Hudson on May 10, 1783. Independence had been won and the Continental army was soon to disband. The officers, realizing that the bonds of friendship and mutual respect, forged through eight years of war, were about to be severed, sought to establish an association which would serve as a means of bringing them together occasionally to live over their campaigns. Each officer donated one month's pay to form a fund for the relief of needy members and their families. Those officers who had served for three years or to the end of the war were eligible for membership. To perpetuate the society it was decided that on the death of a member, his eldest son or next male heir, should succeed him in the Cincinnati.

The name of the society was taken from that of the illustrious Roman general, Lucius Quintus Cincinnatus, who, at the call of country, left his farm and led the armies of Rome to victory; and when that victory had been achieved, returned again to his plough.

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refusing the honors proffered him by a grateful Senate. Cincinnatus is revered as the ideal of Roman simplicity and patriotism.

What could be more natural than that the Society of the Cincinnati should choose as its head the man whose conduct had so strikingly resembled that of Cincinnatus of old? The first meeting unanimously elected General Washington president general, and he accepted the office and signed the roll.

Viewed from the distance of more than a century and a half, we find it difficult to understand the criticism that was aroused by the Institution of the Cincinnati providing for hereditary membership. Today when there are so many of the so-called hereditary "patriotic societies," we find it most natural that a group of old soldiers should wish their ideals transmitted to their descendants. But in 1783 politicians such as the Adamses, Jefferson, Gerry, and Jay, men who had rendered no military service and were ineligible to membership, accused the Cincinnati of attempting to establish a hereditary aristocracy. These men were powerful and their criticisms had their effect. General Washington became convinced that the only way to allay the suspicions of certain people, was to abolish the hereditary feature of the Cincinnati. Accordingly at their first general meeting, held in Philadelphia in May of 1784 the delegates voted to adopt an "Altered and Amended Institution" which, omitting the hereditary part, would be found unobjectionable even to such suspicious minds as that of wily old Samuel Adams.

Like the Constitutional Convention, the second general meeting of the Cincinnati was called to assemble in Philadelphia during the first week of May, 1787. The state societies had not ratified the "Altered and Amended Institution" so that heredity succession was still, as now, in full effect. Some of the men who later were to work *for* the ratification of the Constitution, worked *against* the ratification of the changed Institution of the Cincinnati. General Washington was still troubled about the fears of Mr. Jefferson and others, groundless though we now know them to have been. He wrote to Colonel Alexander Hamilton, a man destined one day to succeed him as president general, that "if the Society of the Cincinnati mean to live in peace with the rest of their fellow citizens, they must subscribe to the alterations" in the Institution. And he added: "that the jealousies of, and prejudices against

this society were carried to an unwarrantable length, I will readily grant. . . . It is a matter of little moment whether the alarm which seized the public mind was the result of foresight—envy and jealousy—or a disordered imagination. . . ."

James Madison was one of that group of statesmen not eligible to membership in the Cincinnati, but who nevertheless saw no reason to fear it. To him Washington wrote that his desire to have the society avoid any objections on the part of others made him feel still that the provision for hereditary members should be dropped. He also spoke of his declining health and that he must continue in his decisions to decline re-election as president general of the society.

Since he had announced to the Cincinnati that he could not attend the triennial general meeting in Philadelphia in May of 1787, he felt that he could not accede to the requests, urgent though they were, to serve as one of Virginia's delegates at the Constitutional Convention. "Under the circumstances," he wrote, "it will readily be perceived that I could not appear at the same time and place on any other occasion, without giving offense to a very worthy and respectable part of the community, the late officers of the American Army."

The situation was urgent. Already men whose vision told them that the Federal Constitution was necessary if the future of the country was to be assured, besought him to serve. Washington, and Washington alone, could inspire the confidence necessary to make the adoption of a Constitution possible. In peace, as in war, as well as in the hearts of his countrymen, to paraphrase the happy expression of "Lighthorse" Harry Lee of the Virginia Cincinnati, Washington was first. His state and country, like his fellow members of the Cincinnati, called him to Philadelphia. Governor Randolph of Virginia, likewise of the Cincinnati, wrote him, saying: "I feel like an intruder when I again hint a wish that you would join the delegation. Every day brings forth some new crisis and the Confederation is, I fear, the last anchor of our hope."

General Knox, secretary general of the Cincinnati, and the man who had first conceived of the society, wrote to Washington, in reply to his query, that hostile feeling was already beginning to diminish, and urged him to be present at the Cincinnati general meeting.

Mr. Jefferson, on the other hand, used his most eloquent arguments against the Cincinnati. Dislike of the society was, perhaps, the only public question upon which Jefferson and John Adams heartily agreed. Adams felt that the Cincinnati "is the first step taken to deface the beauty of our temple of liberty," and wrote that Cincinnatus himself had been overrated! Jefferson, then minister to France, warned Washington that the Cincinnati was contrary to the "letter of some of our Constitutions and to the spirit of all of them," and in opposition to "the natural equality of man." He declared himself to be "an enemy of the Institution from the first moment of its conception."

At length Washington, as usually happened, made his decision without being swayed by others. He decided that he owed a duty to the Constitutional Convention and to the triennial general meeting of the Cincinnati. He would go to Philadelphia and attend both. On April 2, 1787 he wrote to General Knox: "If I attend the convention, I will be in Philadelphia previous to the meeting of the Cincinnati, where I shall hope and expect to meet you and some others of my particular friends the day before, in order that I may have a free and unreserved conference with you on the subject of it; for, I assure you, this is in my estimation a business of a delicate nature. That the design of the Institution was pure, I have not a particle of doubt . . . but is not the subsiding of the jealousies respecting it to be ascribed to the modifications, which took place at the last general meeting?" In other words, the abolition of the hereditary succession.

To Governor Randolph of Virginia he wrote a few days before (March 28, 1787) that he feared it might be considered inconsistent again to enter public life when he had announced his retirement. But, to the good fortune of our country, he added these words: "However, as my friends, with a degree of solicitude which is unusual, seem to wish for my attendance on this occasion, I have come to a resolution to go."

In the same letter General Washington told Governor Randolph that he wished to reach Philadelphia not later than the first of May, in order that he might "be there in time to account personally for my conduct to the general meeting of the Cincinnati, which is to convene the first Monday of that month. My feelings would be much hurt, if that body should otherwise ascribe my attending

the one and not the other occasion to a disrespectful attention to the society, when the fact is, that I shall ever retain the most lively and affectionate regard for the members of which it is composed, on account of their attachment to me and uniform support upon many trying occasions, as well as on account of their public virtues, patriotism, and sufferings."

And so, as the world knows, Washington did attend the Constitutional Convention and under his guiding hand "We, the People of the United States" did in fact "form a more perfect union." But, as the world in general does not know, he likewise attended the general meeting of the Society of the Cincinnati in Philadelphia at the same time, and again accepted the position of president general. He held the office until his death and has bequeathed to the old society a priceless heritage. His fears about the opposition to the Cincinnati were quieted. He wrote to Samuel Vaughan: "There is not, I conceive, an unbiased mind, that would refuse the officers of the late army the right of associating for the purpose of establishing a fund for the support of the poor and distressed of their fraternity, when many of them, it is well known, are reduced to their last shifts by the ungenerous conduct of their country in not adopting more vigorous measures to render their certificates productive."

It would appear that the people of the United States who elected so many members of the Society of the Cincinnati as their delegates to the Constitutional Convention were in no fear of the society, as a menace to republican institutions. Indeed by the time the Constitution was adopted opposition to the Cincinnati had about ceased.

Twenty-seven of the sixty-five Framers of the Constitution of the United States were members of the Society of the Cincinnati. That forty-one per cent of this illustrious group of men were of the old society is one of our proudest memories. Of the twenty-seven Cincinnati who took part in the framing of the document, twenty-three were signers of the complete work.

Here are the names of these distinguished public servants. I list them in the geographical order of their states, this being the sequence in which the roll of states was always called in the Continental Congress, beginning with New Hampshire in the north and ending with Georgia in the south:

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New Hampshire:	Nicholas Gilman
Massachusetts:	Rufus King
New York:	Alexander Hamilton
	John Lansing
	Robert Yates
New Jersey:	John Blair
	David Brearly
	Jonathan Dayton
	William Livingston
Pennsylvania:	Benjamin Franklin
	William Jackson
	Thomas Mifflin
	Gouverneur Morris
	Robert Morris
	James Wilson
Delaware:	John Dickinson
Maryland:	Daniel Jenifer
	James McHenry
Virginia:	James McClurg
	Nathaniel Pendleton
	Edmund Randolph
	George Washington
North Carolina:	Alexander Martin
South Carolina:	Pierce Butler
	Charles Cotesworth Pinckney
Georgia:	Abraham Baldwin
	William Pierce

Of this group, three became, in turn, presidents general of the Society of the Cincinnati—Washington, Hamilton, and Pinckney. Pennsylvania, with six, had more than any other state. On the other hand, some of the enemies of the Cincinnati were no friends of the new Constitution. Samuel Adams, for example, was afraid of it, while Elbridge Gerry, whose name is perpetuated in the term "gerrymander," voted against it as a delegate.

To-day, America's two most precious documents are exhibited in the Library of Congress in Washington—the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States. Another historic parchment likewise bearing the signatures of many of the

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founders of the nation, is also deposited in that building. It is the Institution of the Society of the Cincinnati. Like the Constitution, the first signature thereon is that of the Father of his Country, General George Washington.

The Society of the Cincinnati is not without its claim to the gratitude of the country, as Washington himself said. That his sense of duty to the society was a factor in consenting to attend the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia is, perhaps, an additional reason for making us hope that our country will never object to the Latin motto adopted by the founders of the Cincinnati, *Esto perpetua,* "Be thou perpetuated." The words apply both to the society and to the nation.

[1] Address delivered at the Constitution Day celebration at Reading, Pennsylvania, under the auspices of the Joseph Hiester Chapter, Sons of the American Revolution and the Berks County Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution, September 17th, 1937.

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